

## Added Attractions

Though logic, observation, and common sense all indicate that even architecture is vulnerable to the quixotic forces of economy, time, and personal taste, it forms a matrix for orientation when much else seems in a state of permanent transition. The pattern of architecture—the memory of a specific building or buildings—insinuates itself into and enters the human mind, creating a complex cartography of representation and recollection. And while architecture affirms our faith in the veracity of the physical world, it simultaneously helps to concretize for us the incoherent experience and illusive conception of time. The process and evidences of construction give time a certain legibility. The movement of the body through the spaces of architecture creates another kind of inscription of temporality. Buildings and spaces are charged with this dynamic exchange of the tangible and the immaterial, of visible characteristics and pure phenomena.

But architecture can also be disturbingly mute. An active, deliberate awareness is frequently required to release its intrinsic, but not always transparent, ideas. For example, Christo's projects and proposals to wrap, bind, and gag buildings are his most compelling projects. His invasions bordering on assault—in order to conceal architecture's face, make it temporarily disappear—are radical acts. The great irony of these projects and proposals, however, lies in the fact that Christo's ghosted forms serve to enhance the iconic power of the original buildings at the precise moment when the physical mass is articulated and exaggerated by the

wrapping, and the texture of surface materials, windows, and color acquire altered qualities through the memory's creative embellishment. Unlike Christo, artist Tadashi Kawamata does not make buildings disappear entirely, but he aggressively and suggestively changes their character through his commensalist interventions. *at the same table*

His temporary projects may affect the architecture ever so briefly, but they radically transform the perception and the history of the object, and its image in the public's consciousness. The enduring idea of the building is amended by his short-lived encroachments. Kawamata's installations are sutures that stitch together the temporal and concrete dimensions of architecture.

Kawamata's found-wood constructions, attached to the edifices of buildings, may appear to be great constructivist fantasies. But they evoke other associations as well. Buildings with a Kawamata project affixed to their sides recall the assemblages of scrap material clinging to the enormous magnets suspended from junkyard cranes. As those cranes slowly rotate and stoop toward piles of discarded metal, scraps of metal seem suddenly propelled to the smooth surface of the magnets' simple abstract form, jutting out like giant quills or thistles to create a marvelous, hairy silhouette. Kawamata's works make it seem as if an entire building site had suddenly developed such a strong magnetic force, sucking to its sides all the assorted detritus and debris from the city beyond. When the charge dissipates, we can imagine, the pieces of refuse will drop off and scatter once again into the urban landscape of garbage and neglect.

Kawamata's work is more about this kind of phenomenal occurrence than about structure or construction. Certainly these unruly inventions illuminate nothing

about structural integrity or economy. They are purposefully unrestrained, overbuilt, excessive, and excited. The goal here seems to lie in the satisfaction of some frenetic energy, rather than in the achievement of some conclusive form. The work is about how most people would like to build, and how almost every child does. Even if the artist has deliberated and calculated the finished forms, the result seems accretive, adjustable, and improvised. Kawamata's projects tweak the obvious meticulousness of architecture—the formal rigidity of the grand plan and the skillful orchestration required to create even the most simple space. His work suggests a process of urgency and expedience that nevertheless is contingent upon the inflexibility and security of the systematically constructed building.

Kawamata began as a student of painting who first hung his work within the traditional gallery space in conventional ways. But there was a sense of restlessness and a growing frustration with the restraints of painting; his interests rapidly moved beyond the painted surface to the underlying structure of the stretched canvas and the picture plane. His rather literal manipulations of structure and frame began to stray, eventually expanding to consume the entire gallery space. People moved through rather than walked up to a Kawamata. By 1979, he was working exclusively with timber constructions, and moved, for the first time, outside the gallery. His *By Land*, for example, was a rambling structure situated on a Tokyo riverbed under elevated railroad tracks. *By Land*, in fact, was extremely difficult to approach by foot; here, the spectator was unlikely either to walk up to or walk through the piece, but rather to register its presence as one passed above it in a rapidly moving railroad car. In 1981, Kawamata installed a construction in Art Space Gallery in Nagoya; the wooden elements of his *Measure Scene, Nagoya* simultaneously submitted to and attacked both the interior space of



the gallery and the space outside. Kawamata's career trajectory condenses the immense changes provoked by and registered in environmental and conceptual art through the 1960s and '70s. Over the years, his poetic wooden forms—first frames, then planes, and now full spatial structures—have grown to enfold both interior and exterior space in a peculiar, awkward embrace that constrains and caresses the architecture at once. Yet contemplating his evolution is like beholding the process by which a small organism, injected with steroids, inflates to an enlarged athleticism. For a time, it is difficult to distinguish water weight that will disappear from the real heft that will remain.

For paradoxically, though Kawamata's dramatic shift in scale has required that everything get bigger, more calculated, and more ambitious, the real changes that have occurred involve the nature and composition of his audience and the quality and duration of their encounter with the work. Not only does a wider art audience now seek out Kawamata's projects, but the citizen in the streets has also become an active agent in this channel of communication, so that the work is faced with meetings that are deliberate and focused as well as fleeting and distracted. Kawamata's response to this vast variety of the world has been to move toward a language that, if not formulaic, has become quite fixed.

Two of his recent projects in particular show the possibilities, as well as the limitations, of his approach. Both were temporary installations, and both were planned within the context of a large art event but sited in "public" locations.

*Destroyed Church*, 1987, was a project that Kawamata built for Documenta 8, in Kassel, West Germany. Kassel, like many other German cities, experienced leveling destruction during the air raids of World War II. A small church on a trapezoidal site was badly damaged by bombs; only the facade and external

walls were left erect. The interior was devastated, leaving a rubble-strewn floor that has since filled with native vegetation. This particular building is a monument by default; neither rebuilt nor torn down, it is a disquieting memorial to violent events. the site could not be more visually or metaphorically loaded. It was here that Kawamata and ten assistants began a three-month process of construction in March 1987. Because the structural integrity of the original floor was compromised, Kawamata and his team excavated the site so that it sank beneath the ground plane of the city. For scrap wood, lumber, and other castoffs, Kawamata fashioned a dense, irregular lattice that filled the interior of the church, straddled the low walls, and wrapped like thick, viney<sup>like</sup> vegetation around the building shell. In some sections, the density of this almost crystallike<sup>n</sup> structure obscured the building, while in other corners and stretches the original surface remained uncovered. Kawamata's planned chaos here was like bracket fungus on an old tree trunk, marking its age, its susceptibility to parasites, as well as its continued significance in spite of its diminished vitality. His formal manipulations received and accommodated the rich, catastrophic tale of this building - once a spiritual center and now a powerful urban void.

A year later Kawamata built another grandiose structure—this time for an exhibition at the World Financial Center in New York City, organized by, but certainly not united under, the theme of "new urban landscape." Here, Kawamata was faced not with the sublimity of the urban ruin but with the pomposity and banality of a new skyscraper. Given the option to build either within a vast lobby of the World Financial Center II or in an outdoor area adjacent to the building, he chose to use both conditions. Inspired by the spontaneous, inventive slum dwellings of South America, Kawamata inserted his intentionally sloppy aesthetic into the relentless orthogonal grid of the new

building. His *Favela in Battery Park City: Inside/Outside*, 1988, was a long faceted corridor stretching across an exterior plaza, stopping abruptly at the glass curtain wall of Cesar Pelli's building, and then scuttling along a dark corner of the lobby and the curtain window that marked out the facade of future retail space. The most remarkable quality of the structure was its random, illegible configuration—that its genesis and closure seemed arbitrary—that it seemed like fragment of some more ambitious notion. Wrapping and meandering its way around the slender trees planted in a grid in the plaza, it entwined this imported fecundity, creating a very brittle discourse between recycled nature and reused debris. But if the artist anticipated a deeper dialogue between a disobedient and a more governed esthetic, it never occurred. What might have seemed, at first, like a radical gesture was, in fact, overcome by the basic normative intentions the project shared with its host architectural site. Here, even the original source of inspiration and the organizer's accompanying descriptive text were unable to bolster the critique that the piece supposedly offered of commercial developers' complicity in a social order that has spawned so many homeless. The work may have looked very different, but it still ultimately signified business as usual in this setting. The scale of the installation was adjusted to Pelli's big building, rather than to reflect the diminutive and vulnerable nature of a hand-built shack. In fact, the reference to the slum dwelling was naive if not disingenuous: one couldn't help but be disturbed, in fact, that homeless people weren't being offered warm haven in this piece. Thus Kawamata's favela was loudly rhetorical, conspicuously empty.

Kawamata's work not only needs but in fact feeds directly off the stimulus and the tension of a very complex site. That his symbiotic art is absolutely dependent on the nature and vitality of its host is its most consistent and significant idea; it



is also its most ironic. The challenge, then, as it must sink its life-sustaining roots into its immediate environment, is in how it manages to both negotiate and somehow transcend its own parasitic nature. The catch comes when the dynamic of dependency and interdependency spawns a body of work that can refer to many things and many ideas somewhat superficially, but to none with true passion or tough conviction. An issue of some significance, therefore, is the temporal nature of the work. To make temporary art is both a restraint and a liberty. Kawamata's projects often take a long time to develop, but their realizations are short-lived episodes preceding a final denouement. Certainly, his frugality of materials and methods deployed to multifarious effect is enchanting. But compressed circumstances that generate a sense of urgency sanction also the unpredictability of a risk-taking art. Kawamata, however, is, for the most part, choosing to use these series of temporary installations as a kind of travelling troupe that sets down in different towns. The location is not the same, but the script remains virtually unchanged. The new settings make each work unique, but the formula, like all good systems, is infinitely repeatable. In Kassel, then, Kawamata's incongruity and powerful illogic generated some accelerated, vital exchanges, yet in Battery Park City, despite the almost inevitable engaging effect, the reciprocity was flat and routine. Kawamata seems to be trying to wrestle with some profound questions of contemporaneity, but his work risks residing all too securely within the tradition of the singular autonomous gesture. Its appearance of infinite flexibility and spontaneity is, in fact, beginning to seem an effect produced by a standardized methodology; its radical antiformalism, ironically, an exercise—albeit an exquisite one—in formal manipulation.

But there is potential energy available in this stew of issues and inconsistencies. Kawamata's work is instantly arousing. It delineates the existing context through

its own magnificent obsessiveness. If its seductive layering, its tactility, its overbuilding, are still in the service of tentatively constructed ideas, if these projects suggest questions that they might be about but never quite ask, nevertheless, in taking the readymade of architecture and temporarily amending it, this lush ephemeral work has the potential to stimulate lasting provocation and insinuation, deeper and tougher examinations of our "given" world. In Kawamata's work, we can see the glimmers of what, adequately nourished and explored, might become a truly critical and imaginative—as well as an exhilarating—enterprise.

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